Archives - Film

Peterson, Sidney

original in
AAF--Peterson

1437 Washington street
San Francisco

December 18 1946

Dear Douglas:

I meant to get this letter off to you a week ago. Anyway, here it is now, with apologies for the delay.

As I see it and as we agreed the other night a cinematographic workshop might provide a limited number of students with the opportunity to collaborate in a creative effort in a medium profoundly sympathetic to the clarification of the process ordinarily called creative. The gradual crystalization of aims in the course of a production, the prolonged conflict and final resolution of the struggle between the demands of the subject and the life, to employ Professor Focillon's phrase, of forms, the incessant use of those intuitions, sensations and suggestions that too often, with still works of art, are limited to beginnings - the pedagogic possibilities in a situation envolving such elements are many and obvious. I spare you repetition of the details. Inevitably, in the course of such a business (or should I say the business of such a course?) the student would learn how to shoot a film. This might or might not be practical.

Eighteen weeks and three hours a week would be time enough for the production of a finished work of say around a thousand feet, to run around thirty minutes. By shooting a hundred feet at each meeting, the results could be projected and hashed over at the following meeting. The first hour, more or less, to be devoted to the showing and discussion. A thousand good feet out of eighteen hundred would be extraordinary but not impossible. It might be a good idea to start the whole proceedings with some fragments of assorted works by way of exorcising Hollywood. It might not, of course, be necessary. Depending upon the kinds of students. Their number should be limited. Say fifteen for an absolute maximum.

Setting up such a workshop would be in itself an experimental business. We'd have to work out many of the details as we went along. Certainly some more discussion between us is indicated. Since art students are not, we may presume, potential script writers, the script will be prepared for them - by way, no more, of indicating direction etc.

The budget for such a workshop can be a highly flexible thing. A film can be produced with nothing but film, a camera and a splicer. I have the camera and the splicer. I don't think the production contemplated should be on quite such a stark plane. You mentioned the availability of a projector. Lights will be a small expense. The total cost for props for The Potted Psalm, included a potted begonia, ran less than five dollars. The wholesale cost of film is around five dollars per hundred. If we figure 1800 feet the film will be around ninety dollars. Another fifteen should cover lights, film for still pictures etc. I assume that the school would furnish an occasional model. What this adds up to then is a budget of a hundred dollars for the eighteen weeks. I see no reason for supposing that this sum would not be sufficient.

My academic background, very remote, includes the California School of Arts and Crafts in Berkeley, Art Students' League in NY and the University of California. Four years, on and off, in Europe, mostly Paris, may, I suppose, be included as schooling. First cinematic experience was collaborating on a documentary of Nice in 1936. The series

of London photographs with which you are familiar was made in 1937. The Potted Psalm was shot during the Fall of this year. Miscellaneous experimental work fills some of the gaps in this chronology.

I don't know whether these somewhat rambling remarks suit your purpose. If they don't, let me know and I will supplement them.

Sincerely,

Sidney Peterson